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ABSTRACT

A 1987 survey of college English departments revealed that only 74 (38%) of the 194 colleges surveyed offered students the opportunity to specialize in some aspect of writing in addition to literature. A 1992 survey showed that 69% of departments had begun to offer this specialization. Respondents outlined possibilities for organizing and administering college writing programs by answering the question: "who advises students and/or administers the writing emphasis?" Administrative models included: (1) the monarchy in which the department head administers the program and thus spends time on minutia that s/he should spend on larger policy issues; (2) the dictatorship in which a "writing czar" or writing program director serves as administrator; (3) the oligarchy in which an elected or appointed writing program committee makes and attempts to implement policy; (4) the constitutional government model in which those who participate in the program administers it with reciprocal controls according to democratic process; and/or (5) the anarchic model in which highly diffused responsibility results in no one being in control. Those who designed and implemented this survey hope that departments will modify their programs in ways that bring them more in line with the full range of activities now going on in the discipline. (SAM)

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THE ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF AN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING EMPHASIS

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THE ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF AN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING EMPHASIS

The English department of the twenty-first century would provide students with "a remarkably broad perception of theoretical and practical issues in many facets of the discipline we call English" (Stewart 199).

In the summer of 1987, Don Stewart began a survey of English departments, attempting to answer the question "What is an English Major, and What Should It Be?" Stewart reported the results of his survey in a 1989 CCC article. Of major interest was the survey result showing that only 74 of the 194 colleges surveyed, or 38%, offered students the chance to specialize in some aspect of writing in addition to literature. The majority of English departments surveyed by Stewart (55%) offered literature majors with optional electives from other areas of English. Our sense from talking with others from around the country and from articles in the professional literature was that an increasing number of schools were beginning to offer block specializations in writing, rather than simply adding electives to a literature major.

Our 1992 survey attempted to ascertain whether or not the balance had shifted away from the straight literature programs and toward the programs offering specializations in some aspect of writing. We sensed that students themselves were demanding the opportunity to specialize in writing in all of its

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manifestations, including expository and fiction, professional and technical, rhetorical and theoretical writing.

In my presentation, I will focus on what our survey suggested about the organization and administration of undergraduate writing emphases, describing the trends and outlining the possibilities for administering such programs. [The first speaker on this panel, Jeanette Harris, reported on the results of the survey, interpreting the findings and discussing their implications for not only writing programs but also the departments in which they exist.]

I. DESCRIBE TRENDS "How many programs offer undergraduate writing emphases and of what types?"

Question #5 on our survey asked "Can undergraduate English majors pursue an 'emphasis' or 'concentration' in writing?" More than two-thirds of our four-year college respondents, 69%, answered YES to this question, compared to the 38% in Stewart's survey of just a few years ago. For those who answered "yes" to question #5, we followed up with a series of questions trying to characterize the various configurations that writing emphases could take:

Of the 69% which offered a writing concentration:

57% offered creative writing emphasis

37% offered a broad range of writing courses

35% offered technical and professional writing

7% offered rhetoric/composition emphasis

2% offered writing pedagogy

As you can see from this overview, undergraduate writing programs are configured differently at different schools and colleges. Slightly over one-fourth (27%) of the four-year colleges surveyed offered students a choice of writing tracks within the English major. In general, it seemed that the larger universities were able to offer a greater variety of program options than the smaller colleges. We also wanted to find out, when students had choices of tracks, what their choices might be. We found that,

Of the 27% which offered students a choice of writing tracks:

92% included creative writing as an option

80% included tech/prof writing as an option

32% included journalism as an option

20% included writing pedagogy as an option

12% included rhetoric/composition as an option

II. OUTLINE POSSIBILITIES "How are undergraduate writing emphases organized and administered?"

As the former Soviet Union struggles to define itself and its political system, governmental structures and how they are defined have been much in the news. In thinking through the possible ways that writing emphases in English departments could be organized and administered, I thought it might be helpful to compare the organizational patterns to the ways in which

"political systems" can be organized. One of our survey questions asked "who advises students and/or administers the writing emphasis?" From respondents' answers, in addition to my own experiences with writing program administration, I have outlined the following possible scenarios:

1. Monarchy

Political monarchies come in two forms, (a). strong, with an absolute ruler, and (b). weak, with a ceremonial head of state. Monarchies in English department administration are most closely analogous to (a). the Department Head, who is often a strong, absolute ruler over an entire department, or (b). the Department Chair, who may be a more ceremonial leader of a department.

In several of the colleges and universities which offer writing emphases, the department head or division chair administers the program, a person analogous to a department monarch. (However, unlike monarchies, department chairs are not often legitimized by blood descent.) Relying on the department head/chair to administer all of the undergraduate programs in a department has obvious advantages and disadvantages. A department monarch certainly has the "big picture," as it were, of the whole department; but by the same token, this person can make or break a program depending on personal belief systems or political leanings. There is also a tendency for a monarch to micro-manage programs when there is no delegation to others. Micro-managing creates problems for everybody because the monarch is spending time with minutia when he or she should be dealing

with larger policy issues.

2. Dictatorship

We are all familiar with notorious political dictatorships around the world. Dictatorships are characterized by a single mass party or a charismatic leader, an official ideology, terrorism, a regulated press, and the use of science/technology to control the economy and behavior of individuals.

Writing emphasis programs in English departments often come under the auspices of the Director of Writing Programs, a sort of "writing dictator" or "writing czar" who is the administrator in charge of all writing programs. One would hope that such writing czars are "benevolent dictators" who do not resort to tactics of terrorism and coercion. However, not everyone in English departments sees writing program directors as benign. On the contrary, they are often perceived by English faculty to be threatening dictators, to be power-mongers, hungering to snatch up territory and secure allegiances.

The main advantage of having a writing dictator is that there is one person who is the program advocate; furthermore he or she can coordinate all of the various arms of the writing program, perhaps ranging broadly from writing across the curriculum to developmental English. The writing dictator can standardize curriculum and supervise faculty and staff, thereby ensuring students a comparable experience from section to section of a particular course.

But the citizens of the state lead by a dictator may sometimes feel disenfranchised, particularly if the writing program is staffed largely by part-time lecturers and Teaching Assistants; and the neighboring territories can feel threatened by turf battles. Another problem with dictatorships is one of personality. Often a dictator is a charismatic leader whose program is solely dependent on the persuasive powers and personal charm of its leader. Once this person is gone, a program dependent on a personality can disintegrate.

Some programs have created "mini-dictators" by confining the director's oversight to a particular course or level; examples include "Director of Freshman Writing" or "Director of First-year English." Other programs include the administration of an undergraduate writing emphasis under the auspices of the "Director of Undergraduate English Majors" or the "Director of Undergraduate Studies." Such a structure can work well, particularly in smaller programs, so long as the director of English majors does not harbor personal biases for or against particular tracks within the major.

3. Oligarchy

We no longer see very many political systems based on oligarchy, a term referring to rule by a small, elite group. However, oligarchies abound in the higher education setting. An example of a writing program oligarchy is one administered by a Writing Program Committee, which may be an elected or an appointed group.

There has been some discussion recently on the computer WPA-List about program administration by committee, most of it negative, pointing out the obvious problems with policy implementation in a committee structure. An oligarchy does have the advantage, however, of spreading out some of the responsibility for the program to others in the department. But whether a program committee works for or against the writing track will depend on the makeup of the group itself and how it is chosen.

Some programs include a Writing Program Committee in addition to a Director of Writing Programs. If the program committee is more than advisory to the director, if the committee is actually responsible for setting and implementing program policies, my experience is that the writing dictator can be the victim of a coup by the power elite.

Some years ago at another university, I found myself operating under such a system; I remember feeling much like I imagine Boris Yeltsin must be feeling these days, as he tries to drag the Russian Congress kicking and screaming into a free-market economy. As the Director of Freshman and Sophomore English, I was given a tremendous responsibility over a very large, diverse program. However, I was not given the authority to carry out the policies and procedures that I felt were necessary to bring the program along. Rather, every step I took was met with tremendous resistance or outright opposition by an oligarchy of department "elites" on the Composition Committee, who were determined to keep the world safe from the comma splice.

4. Constitutional Government

In higher education in America, we like to think that we rule by a constitutional government, by a fixed set of norms or principles that guide our actions and influence our decisions. In a constitutional government that has adopted the principles of democracy, the will of the majority is ascertained through free elections. Ideally, a constitutional government includes reciprocal controls with no one person or group dominating. Departments and programs strive to meet this ideal as well as governments, with more or less success.

As we know from experience, higher education is organized as a hierarchical enterprise. In organizing writing programs, we typically follow this kind of hierarchical structure without really seeing the alternatives. In contrast, a constitutional democracy allows those who are governed to be represented at every level of the government. An egalitarian, representative democracy is something that English departments which are working well often have adopted. Some version of a department constitution can also be a help to everyone. Such a document would not only describe administrative procedures and policies, but also outline departmental philosophies and goals.

As we know from our own experience in American political systems, there is a downside to a constitutional democracy. It is often cumbersome and glacially slow (gridlock, as Ross Perot would say). A monarchy, dictatorship, or even oligarchy is

infinitely less messy than a democracy, and decisions can be made and implemented rapidly. We also know that the populace is not always necessarily as informed as their leaders and may be in less of a position to make good decisions. In a speech recently on my campus, a speaker made the point that she thought it ridiculous for politicians to say they would follow the will of the America people. After all, she said, the American people are still looking for Elvis.

5. Anarchy

Anarchy, of course, is the state of affairs when there is no governmental control. One survey respondent said that "no one in the department administers or advises" the writing emphasis. I'm not quite sure if this school is an example of anarchy, but certainly it is a novel approach to have no one in charge. It does make you wonder how anything ever gets done; but maybe the department is content not to have anything ever get done. Or perhaps by answering "no one," the respondent meant to convey a shared responsibility wherein decisions are made collectively rather than hierarchically. In fact, one definition of anarchy is "a theory that regards the absence of all direct or coercive government as a political ideal and that proposes the cooperative and voluntary association of individuals and groups as the principal mode of organized society." Not a bad theory, actually.

III. DISCUSS ACTION "How can we become agents of change in our own departments and programs?"

In a recent WPA article, in which she describes the Colgate Writing Program's successful bid for departmental status, Rebecca Moore Howard talks about the ways in which she and others in her writing program used institution-changing power to establish the "Colgate Department of Interdisciplinary Writing." Howard describes institution-changing power as that used by individuals and groups who reside outside the bounds of the typical institutionally sanctioned power structures.

In her article, Howard outlines what she describes as six methods of institution-changing power that helped them to become a department of interdisciplinary writing. These six methods can also be useful as we think about making changes in undergraduate degree programs within English departments as well:

1. The personal approach--engaging colleagues in conversations about the proposed program; tactfully educating others about what a writing emphasis can do and why it is a desirable option educationally for students.

2. Popularity--offering to students a program that is popular, one that appeals to students and at the same time prepares them for the real exigencies of the job market.

3. "Good girls"--Howard points out how important it is to be cooperative, to participate in the work of the department, to be a team-player. Other areas of the department will want to see

how a writing track can be integrated into programs currently in place.

4. Opportunism--stay alert to opportunities when they arise; for example, will there be a departmental review in which a writing option can be discussed? Have local employers expressed a need for students who are better-trained in writing and editing? Are there statistics available that show the employability of writing graduates? Make use of any and all opportunities to tout your idea.

5. Persistence--be patient, be persistent, be politic. Don't let a good idea be killed by lack of interest or follow-through on your part. Keep the idea at the forefront of the department's agenda by continuing to bring it up.

6. Collectivism--share information and keep in contact with others in the department to foster a shared sense of mission among colleagues. Actively court others, who may be fence-sitting, to join your camp. Working together and presenting a united front can wield enormous institution-changing power.

In closing, I would like to return to Don Stewart's statement that "I am not so naive as to believe that English departments will welcome, much less effect the reforms I suggest." Our survey shows that, indeed, English departments are beginning to effect such changes in their undergraduate English majors. We still have a long way to go. I would like to echo Stewart's hope that departments will "modify their programs, in ways their staffs and resources permit, to bring them more in

line with the full range of activities now going on in our discipline and in line with the needs of our modern society" (199).